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ABSTRACT

This book examines the nature of persistent poverty in two impoverished towns in the coalfields of Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta and a contrasting social milieu in a prosperous but remote rural mill town in northern New England. Drawing on 350 in-depth interviews and census data, the book analyzes the dynamics of poverty, politics, and community change. The stories of haves and have-nots in Appalachia and the Delta illustrate how inequality erodes a community's social fabric, destroying trust, feeding corrupt politics, and undermining institutions that could help poor families achieve the American Dream. In contrast, a northern New England town dominated by a blue-collar middle class maintains a rich civic culture with inclusive institutions that help the poor to escape poverty, and people of all social classes talk about the trust and lack of differences that make the community a good place to live. A final chapter on social change and social policy points out that everyone who escaped poverty in the two impoverished towns had finished high school, and everyone who finished high school and went to college left poverty behind. However, when schools are merely patronage delivery systems or targets of discriminatory neglect, it takes special intervention by a mentor to get a child an education. Creating good schools in these impoverished communities would require challenging the "local control" that perpetuates feudal social relations. An appendix contains demographic data tables and figures. (Contains references in notes and an index.) (SV)

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